

BOOK REVIEWS

Book Reviews

*Air Bilean an t-Shuaigh: Sealladh air Leantalachd Beul-Aithris Ghàidhlig Uibhist a Tuath*¹. Maighread A. Challan. Belfast Studies in Language, Culture and Politics 23, Queen's University Press, 2012. ISBN: 978 0 85389 988 4 (pbk). pp. xvi + 256; map, illus.

In this book, Margaret Callan provides an overview of the traditions of her native island in which she demonstrates an appreciation not only of their formal diversity and imaginative vibrancy, but more particularly of their social context and function within Gaelic culture. In doing so, she brings to the study of Gaelic oral traditions an appreciation of the concerns of ethnographers and anthropologists over the past century, and demonstrates their compelling importance not only to those whose interests are literary or historical, but also to scholars seeking to understand how pre-literate societies expressed and maintained their cultural integrity and values through many generations.

Modelled upon an outline suggested by American anthropologist W. R. Bascom,² Callan's analysis reviews the social contexts in which oral traditions were exchanged and kept alive; describes the cultural understanding, practices and values of Gaelic society, of which its oral traditions are a verbal reflection; and examines the ways in which oral traditions functioned to ensure the well-being and long-term survival of that society. Her work adds an important dimension to the study of Scottish Gaelic oral traditions, which has long focused on the content of the traditions themselves rather than upon the cultural context in which they were transmitted. Because Callan writes in Gaelic, a short summary of her analysis may be useful here.

While readers of *Scottish Studies* will be aware of the central importance of the céilidh house in the passing on of tales, songs, and other lore, we are usefully reminded that such transmission occurred elsewhere as well. Wherever people's daily work took them – to the moor for the cutting of peats, to the loch to wash blankets, to the machair to lift potatoes, to the grinding-mill or the smithy, to the market to sell livestock, to a fishing-boat at anchor, to a neighbour's house to plan for the fank – all such settings provided occasions for the exchange of news and knowledge. Indeed, some types of work such as milking and spinning were facilitated by the accompaniment of song, while the waulking of tweed actually required it. Apart from the work context, social occasions such as engagements and weddings, the obsequies following a death, and various aspects of religious practice afforded settings in which oral traditions and knowledge could be exchanged and recalled to mind.

Citing I. M. Lewis' definition of *culture* as 'the sum of learned knowledge and skills – including religion and language – that distinguish one community from another and which, subject to the vagaries of innovation and change, passes on in a recognisable form from generation to generation',³ Callan discusses the features of social life that most clearly define the Gaelic culture of North Uist: the high value placed upon 'community kinship' and co-operation; the gender-based understanding of roles and authority; the importance of memory, and people's pride in being able to remember and deliver a song or story precisely as they had learned it; the importance of family relationships, and the acknowledgement of traits and talents reckoned to run in certain families. She shows how most oral traditions reflected those cultural values in everyday life: the practice of *sloinneadh* and the naming of children, which enabled people to keep track of relationships within a small community, and to show pride in

and respect for their ancestors; the use of proverbs and tales, which demonstrated the close connection between language, knowledge and philosophy; the hymns and sayings that revealed people's religious belief and spirituality; and the role of local bards in formally expressing the history, experience, emotions and values of the community.

In addition, she mentions those traditions traceable to pre-Christian belief-systems, such as the observance of certain holidays (Callainn, Bealtainn, St Bridget's Day); belief in fairies, omens, ghosts, the evil eye and the second-sight; the practice of moving 'sunwise' when travelling in a circle or setting out on a journey; the designation of certain days as 'lucky' or 'unlucky' for certain types of work or activity; the practice of blessing the fire, while smooching it, to ensure that it stayed alive overnight. Such customs – not to mention the frequent appearance of supernatural themes, characters and elements in tales, songs and other lore – run counter to the expressed values of an observant Christian community, and reflect a frequently-noted difference between the substance and meaning of oral tradition within a culture, and how people actually conduct themselves within that culture – a conundrum which, as Bascom puts it, 'raises significant questions about the...psychological implications and the sociological functions of folklore'.⁴

Oral tradition in the Gaelic-speaking communities of North Uist functioned to support the culture of the people, thereby helping to ensure the health and viability of the community. As entertainment, the telling of stories and singing of songs not only helped fix these items in the memories of those who performed and listened to them, but also reinforced commitment to those qualities that characterized an excellent performance, and acknowledged the importance of the material being performed as it had been learned 'from the old people'. Whether in the *céilidh*-house, at the celebration of an engagement or wedding, at the time of a death and burial, or at worship, oral traditions of all kinds validated the culture, strengthened the unity and identity of the community, and renewed people's familiarity with the tales, songs, hymns and other lore that were their common heritage.

Oral traditions also played a crucial role in the education of children, whose first lessons took the form of songs, rhymes, proverbs, riddles, and short tales teaching the wisdom of the ancestors and knowledge of local history, geography and genealogy. Even an adult, however, might need an occasional reminder – often a proverb – that his behaviour or choices might have negative consequences. In such fashion oral traditions inculcated and supported the community's values and rules for conduct, and gave people a means of enforcing the rules while avoiding open conflict or embarrassment.

In her final chapters, Callan explores the reasons behind the gradual attenuation of oral tradition in Uist, and the collapse of traditional culture in the second half of the twentieth century. The horrendous loss of life that islanders suffered during the two world wars (particularly the Great War), and the emigration of many survivors, significantly reduced the population, sapping the confidence of those who remained and lowering the frequency of important occasions (such as engagements and weddings) when the community came together. The improvement of housing stock moved the fireplace from the middle of the floor to the gable-end, a change that many informants said altered the dynamic and affected the frequency of house-gatherings. Community 'concerts' failed to provide the conversation and companionship of the *céilidh* houses, or the variety and vigour of the songs, stories and anecdotes that had animated those earlier gatherings. As a result of all of these changes, people had less opportunity to hear, retain and pass on traditional material, and the knowledge that had been cherished for so many years was greatly diminished within a single generation.

The Gaelic world is not the only culture to have suffered apocalyptic change over the past hundred years. Many rural cultures – including English-speaking ones – have been transformed by mechanization, the collapse of collaborative work practices, the coming of electricity and the telephone, and colonisation by outsiders. A man with a tractor does not need a horse or a blacksmith; fencing eliminates the need for a cowherd; central heating replaces peat-fires; and much of what people need – from foodstuffs to fertilizer – can be purchased from the mainland. New housing schemes obviate the need for several generations to live under one roof. Telephone service and the entertainment media keep people at home. Employment with the County Council or the Army brings money into the community, but also creates inequalities among neighbours. The tragedy for North Uist and places like it is, that the survival of Gaelic culture depended entirely upon the survival of communal work practices and living conditions. When these were swept away, most of the opportunities for the sharing of oral tradition were also lost.

As if these historical and economic pressures were not enough, however, Gaelic culture and identity also suffered deliberate and sustained assault over many years. What the SSPCK could not achieve in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries came to pass in the twentieth: the erosion of Gaelic as a community language. Under pressure from an influx of non-Gaels into the Gàidhealtachd, an educational system that provided instruction exclusively through the medium of English, and the influence of mass media and mass culture, Gaelic speakers lost confidence in their native language to the point that, today, wherever a gathering contains even a single non-Gael, English is used. Even church services in the Gàidhealtachd are now held in English. Worst of all, too many Gaelic-speaking parents assume that Gaelic will disadvantage their children, and speak English at home.

Callan's monograph represents an essential step towards a more holistic appreciation of the traditional life of Gaelic-speaking Scotland and its response to a century of apocalyptic societal, economic and cultural change. The fact that the book is written in Gaelic offers hope that the death-knell of the language has not yet sounded, and that a register appropriate for scholarly discourse may be established in Gaelic, as has happened with Irish and Welsh.⁵ By providing a model for others, Callan's book has established a vital beachhead for such an effort.

The author has, however, overstated her case in a few respects. In making extensive use of the Sound Archive of the School of Scottish Studies, she has drawn some conclusions regarding the work of the School that should not go unchallenged. Principally, it should be recognised that, while the School provided resources for the tape-recording of oral traditions as required to support the work of individual researchers, it was not initially envisaged that these tapes would become part of a permanent sound archive. How else can we explain the fact that recordings made by Calum Maclean in the School's early days were transcribed and then erased so that the tapes – which were expensive – could be used again? Fortunately, this policy was reversed early on. Even then, however, I am assured by Dr John MacInnes – who began collecting for the School in the early 1950s and joined the staff in 1958 – there was never a systematic plan for the School's collecting activities: no assignment of 'territory' among researchers, and no direction given as to what sort of material should be recorded, what questions should be asked, or what methodology should be followed. Individual researchers were left to decide where and how they wished to focus their collecting activities, with some researchers far more committed to collecting than others. This lack of co-ordination may be lamentable, but it does not justify Callan's

statement that ‘scholars of that era had little interest in or respect for North Uist material’ and that they devalued the traditions of North Uist, Harris and Lewis in respect of both collecting activity and subsequent publication.⁶

Despite John Lorne Campbell’s assertion that the richest veins of tradition survived in Catholic South Uist and Barra, collectors from the School of Scottish Studies carried out considerable field work in Protestant areas from an early date. Among the Sound Archive’s treasures are recordings made from 1948-51 in Lewis and North Uist for the Linguistic Survey of the Gaelic Dialects of Scotland by the late Derick Thomson – recordings which include material of considerable relevance to Callan’s study.⁷ Dr MacInnes told me that he never heard anyone disparage North Uist as a site for collecting; indeed, he cited the efforts not just of Thomson but also of D. A. MacDonald and particularly of Angus John MacDonald, who made it his business to call at every house in both Uists and Benbecula, whether they were known to be homes of active tradition-bearers or not.

As regards the well-worn ‘etic’ vs. ‘emic’ argument, there should surely, by this time, be room for compromise. Dr MacInnes, an ‘insider’, tells me that his informants would have considered it very odd of him to ask questions to which he already knew the answers; their interest was in sharing the oral traditions themselves – the songs, stories and *seanchas* that they feared were on the point of being lost. By contrast, it must have seemed natural to Margaret Fay Shaw’s informants to answer questions about the social context of oral traditions, given that she herself was an ‘outsider’.⁸ What seems clear is that before embarking on any field-work the observer needs to speak the community’s language and be thoroughly familiar with its philosophy and values. Although an insider would have a clear head-start in both respects, it is notable that Callan cites the work of John Shaw and Thomas McKean – both of whom are Americans – as models for the sort of culturally-informed and sensitive study she advocates.

From the founding of the School onwards, the advancing age of most informants made the collecting of oral traditions in the Gàidhealtachd a race against time. While some researchers – Eric Cregeen in Tiree, and ethnomusicologist Thorkild Knudsen, who explored the repertoires of Calum Ruadh Nicholson in Skye and Murdina MacDonald in Lewis – preferred to stay in one spot and dig deep, the School’s Gaelic-speaking collectors tried to cover as much ground as possible, knowing that they themselves possessed all the contextual knowledge they would need to evaluate and assess what they had collected when they had the leisure to do so. With the passing of these researchers, as of the culture within which they were raised, it is high time for such evaluation and assessment to gather pace. Margaret Callan is to be commended for her contribution to this effort.

V.S. BLANKENHORN

NOTES

¹ Roughly translated: *From the Mouths of the People: A Survey of the Transmission of Oral Tradition in North Uist*.

² ‘Four functions of folklore’ (1954). *Journal of American Folklore* 67: 333-49.

³ *Social Anthropology in Perspective*. New York: 1977: 17.

⁴ *Op. cit.*: 338.

⁵ The author informs me that an English translation of her book is planned.

⁶ ‘*Tha fianais ann gun deachaidh dìmeas agus dearmad a dhèanamh air beul-aithris Uibhist a Tuath le sgoilearan an ama,*’ p. 5; also p. 6, ‘*Tha aon rud dearbhte: ann a bhith a’ seachnach Leòdhais agus na Hearadh anns an obair chruinneachaidh aca; ann a bhith a’ dèanamh maill ann a bhith a’ tòiseachadh air cruinneachadh farsaing ann an Uibhist a Tuath; ann a bhith a’ taghadh stuth à Uibhist a Deas fhoillseachadh air thoiseach air stuth à Uibhist a Tuath, chuir sgoilearan Gàidhlig, math dh’fhaodte gun fhiosta dhaibha fhèin, ri [beachd Fhear Chanaidh].*’

⁷ SSS manuscript ‘Early Recorded Discs in Archive’, compiled July 1962, lists the following recordings from North Uist informants: evictions (logs 999, 1031, 1215, 1245); raids from Harris (1001); horse-racing (1012, 1017); a drowning at Sollas (1013); cattle lifting (1013-4, 1210, 1240); a highland funeral (1023); a seafaring story from Houghharry (1066); a speech improvised on the eve of a wedding (1093); privations in North Uist, 1914-18 (1099); illicit distilling (1203, 1248); poaching (1243, 1259); emigration (1241), ploughing matches (2796); the second sight (1244); and other reminiscences (1207-9, 1220-1). These are in addition to a large number of tales, traditional songs, and songs from Roderick MacKay, ‘Bard Iollaraigh’ (logs 1109-1111) and Dòmhnall Ruaidh Chorùna (1151-1201).

⁸ *Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist*, London (1955).

A Traveller in Two Worlds. Volume One: The Early Life of Scotland’s Wandering Bard. David Campbell and Duncan Williamson in Conversation. Edinburgh: Luath Press Limited, 2011. ISBN 978-1906817-88-6. £14.99.

A Traveller in Two Worlds. Volume Two: The Tinker and the Student. David Campbell. Edinburgh: Luath Press Limited, 2012. ISBN 978 1 908373 32 8. £14.99.

Duncan Williamson (1928 – 2007) was a traveller, a singer, and a storyteller regarded by some as the best in the English language. He was certainly widely known and admired for his presentation of a vital tradition central to Scottish verbal art, and his performances have given rise to a substantial literature consisting of publications based on his own recitations, as well as being featured in works by major folklorists and in learned articles in academic journals. In his two volumes David Campbell, a close friend and storytelling colleague of Duncan, has provided a welcome addition to publications on Duncan and his tradition. Campbell is a practiced storyteller, and his work is presented as a single story in two parts. He makes clear from the outset his personal and professional debt to Duncan, yet his story is not confined to the form of a personal memoir: it makes frequent and effective use of 30 tapes of interviews recorded over 10 years with Duncan, and with his friends, associates and family members.

Volume 1 covers Duncan’s youth and early manhood in traveler society up until 1971. As we would expect, the style is anecdotal: the book opens with the first meeting between Duncan and Campbell in 1987. Some episodes parallel those familiar to us from the earlier recorded autobiography *The Horsie man* (1994), an engaging and varied account of life on the road. We are introduced to the setting of Duncan’s boyhood in Argyll and his family background, which includes colourful sketches of his traveller relatives that suggest much in

terms of culture and individual character. We become aware of the travellers' widespread kinship networks, and the large and varied store of skills acquired in the traveller upbringing, including cures, trading and hawking, and foraging for food. In the interviews concerning this stage of his life, Duncan speaks at length about the travellers' awareness of nature and concern for the environment; also their concepts of wealth: topics familiar to today's audiences at public performances of folk tradition. Perhaps as a further means of communicating with the larger world, Duncan emphasizes the educational aspects of childhood enculturation in traveller society, extending from their experience of nature to social interactions with the settled population. In this connection he mentions, as if in passing, the many incidences of active prejudice against travellers. Here, more than elsewhere, he provides us with a view of his own introduction to his oral tradition, introducing us to his maternal grandmother, big Bett MacColl, by his own account a Gaelic speaker, and a major source of the songs he was to perform. Duncan's talent for performance surfaced at an early age with the winning of a medal for poetry recitation at his school in Furnace. This is followed by a notable anecdote of his first storytelling performance, age 7, at the same school where he was given responsibility for the younger children by the teacher and entertained them with the story of the Fox and the Crow: 'So, here was all the little ones and me a seven-year-old. I'm telling them the story.' The consequent change in the teacher's perception of him together with additional requests from the children for more stories led Duncan to aspire to become a storyteller: 'I was going to be as good as my grandmother.' Interestingly, as the anecdote reveals, Duncan's awareness of the power of stories and his wish to tell them, seems to have been awakened in a context outside that of traveller society. A further constant theme to appear is the pervasive sense of loss over the passing of the traveller way of life, which emerges regularly in Duncan's interviews and song compositions. Any preoccupation with the past, however, is relieved by Campbell's technique of forwarding to the time of recording, and to their own developing relationship. There is also the occasional tale from Duncan, by way of illustration.

The world portrayed in this first volume is of a fairly typical traveller existence, albeit an adventurous one. Much of Duncan's youth was spent acquiring a large variety of trades, extending to drag-line fishing and boxing. It ends with two significant developments in Duncan's life: the marriage to his first wife, Jeannie, to start up a family; and his emergence as a traditional singer. During his adolescence, he had begun singing, apparently to some acclaim, at the odd *céilidh* in Argyll. A recording visit from Helen Fullerton, a friend of Hamish Henderson, proved to be the catalyst, and Campbell notes that there was already a sense outside of the traveller world that something important was emerging, where traveller traditions had a central part to play. From his description of the opening up of opportunities, Duncan seemed almost presciently aware of the potential for his own future:

'But I wanted to get out there, to be with people, to sing. This kind of gave me enlightenment about what to do. It was coming up for the 60s and folk music was taking a grip and here was me with all these beautiful songs, a knowledge of songs and stories that some people had never had. That's all I wanted to do. I'd never heard nor never been to The School of Scottish Studies, even though they told me about it.' (236).

A premonition of the future challenges in Duncan's chosen path appears in the reluctance of his wife, Jeannie, to release him into his development as a singer; her feelings were echoed by other members of his traveller family in later years.

In Volume 2, the focus shifts away from traveller life to a more mainstream context, and things begin to take on a life of their own. Together Campbell and Duncan describe at first hand and to great effect what took place in the encounter between the values and demands of the travellers' world, and the larger society with its rewards and expectations. As a narrative thread to hold together an ever-changing and frequently chaotic stream of events, Campbell uses his evolving personal and professional relationship with Duncan and their shared commitment to traditional storytelling. Campbell's writing style throughout is anecdotal and relaxed; yet the issues, questions and agendas encountered are substantial ones that relate directly to the ever increasing number of interactions between 'traditional' societies with their exponents, and audiences and participants from larger, more powerful societies. The story is resumed some years following Duncan's marriage, with the deaths of his wife and of his parents and the responsibility of caring for his own children. Campbell conveys an increasing sense that Duncan's life has reached a watershed, and an inexorable feeling that things will never be the same again. It is certainly true that opportunities and changes for traveller performers arose from the folk revival, and Campbell helpfully describes the context of this larger movement in Scotland. The movement included the promotion of a 'folk consciousness', for which Duncan's background, experience and intelligence had admirably prepared him, and from the late 60s he began singing at festivals, gaining a far wider exposure. Having attracted the attention of academics, sometime in the mid-70s (dates differ according to sources) he was invited to sing at the School of Scottish Studies. His entrance into this and other realms of the "otherworld" was precipitated by his meeting Linda Headlee, a postgraduate student from the US who, we are told, was the first to record his tales. The long-term and fruitful collaboration that was to result from their meeting, stemmed from a reciprocal fascination with the other's world. Linda describes her own search for an alternative to the limitations of her American background, and her transition from what she perceived as a disjointed world to that of the travellers, with an 'aesthetic ... firmly connected with their way of living' (139). Campbell then provides an insightful account of a committed collaboration between two gifted individuals from widely differing cultures, centring on folklore materials. The crossing of boundaries that this alliance entailed, however, was not always easy on either side. Linda's choices were subject to questioning and scrutiny from observers and colleagues, including an academic supervisor: 'Is it possible for an American postgraduate to conceal her identity from those to whom she is hawking paper flowers? I am sure not, and I fear that sooner or later people will begin asking questions' (53). Nearly four decades later, we can wonder how such questions might be received by today's active, professional performers and teachers of Scotland's traditions - including academics - who have originated from beyond its borders.

Duncan's crossing of boundaries appears to have met with wider external acceptance, but as he and Campbell both recount, the social and personal consequences were eventually felt. Pooling their complementary skills and abilities from both worlds, the couple launched on an ideal collaboration, and Linda rapidly became a talented hawker with an ability to work with institutions. It was around that time that Hamish Henderson suggested Duncan publish a book of his stories (89), and Linda proved to be adept at negotiating the publication of the first collection, *Fireside Tales of the Traveller Children* (1983), and the many that followed. Linda was also able to extend Duncan's activities to regular performances of storytelling in the school system, where he excelled. He encouraged Campbell to perform with him in what became an apprenticeship and then a partnership. Such relationships between the cultural mentor and the outside apprentice are an essential and emerging aspect of folklore that has

never been adequately explored in the literature and Campbell recounts his experiences, which were not always easy, with candour and good humour.

The new set of commitments inevitably necessitated changes, not the least of which was a move from the gelly tent to a small cottage. Duncan's growing fame led to a widening of his circle of friends, attracting large numbers of visitors who were generously received and entertained. This period of happiness was tempered by continuing questions for both the traveller and the student. Duncan, in terms of his background and the social commitments of his earlier life, could not have stated his situation more clearly:

'But I chose Linda because it was something different, it was another world. It was a world that I knew nothing about, a world of other people, not of my own culture, not of my own class. Of course, she found the same thing.'

'Now here I was caught in the middle. I'm caught right in the middle between two cultures, two worlds. One life. Only one life to see through. Now was I going one way or the other?' (119, 108)

Campbell handles the account of the various forces at work with tact and a constant awareness of the cultural dimensions at play. In communicating the larger issues he perceives, his delivery draws on the strengths of traditional narrative, relying more on anecdote and verbal art than on surface analysis. He makes no claim to be an ethnologist, yet his account strikes a sensible balance between the theoretical extremes of ethnographic description and has much of interest to offer those in the field, recalling the priorities advocated by Barre Toelken in his exemplary work with North American native peoples (*The Anguish of Snails* 2003: 3). In making clear his own participant role as a close friend and apprentice to Duncan, along with his encounter with traveller traditions and the effect that these had on determining his own life direction, Campbell makes no claims to 'objectivity'. Nevertheless, many of the anecdotes and descriptions in the book are anchored by the tape-recorded interviews, introducing a welcome 'polyvocality'. This technique allows for a balanced and varied portrait of his mentor and their relationship, while managing to avoid the pitfalls of the self-reflective 'me-ethnography' that began to appear in academic publications from the 1970s. It is taken as a given that all human cultures are constantly changing, and that the world's cultures, extending from the 'small' one described here in microcosm to the 'large' ones, are connected in ways we have only begun to perceive.

The final chapter, dealing with the years following Duncan's death in 2007, serves as an epilogue; it recalls the timeliness of his appearance on the Scottish folk scene, and the continuing influence of his storytelling on contemporary storytellers and audiences. What Campbell has brought us is an absorbing story of a complex individual and the people closest to him; one who was possessed of deep loyalties and a broad vision for the future role of a tradition in Scotland to be shared by all.

JOHN SHAW

Keith Norman MacDonald's Puirt-à-Beul. The Vocal Dance of the Scottish Gaels. William Lamb ed. Taigh nan Teud 2012. ISBN 978 1 906804 10 7. £15.00.

Puirt-à-beul “tunes from the mouth”, more commonly known as ‘mouth music’, are a form of verbal music noted over the Gaelic speaking area of Scotland for centuries. They have attracted a small amount of commentary, learned and otherwise, including theories of their origin arising from the proscription of musical instruments. The most complete and authoritative collection to be published, the work of Keith Norman MacDonald (1834 – 1913) of Skye, first appeared in 1901, and in a more recent edition in 1931. The editor of the present edition, William Lamb, provides all of the materials from the earlier editions, with the tunes converted from the original sol-fa to conventional musical notation, and the Gaelic re-edited for consistency. The collection consists of 116 items, including reels, strathspeys, jigs, miscellaneous dance melodies and a variety of song airs. A number of items in the collection appear nowhere else. Aside from the three songs from the Faroe Islands that appear somewhat incongruously at the end, the range of genres is representative of what we would find in Highland communities.

As Lamb indicates in the brief and colourful biography provided, Keith Norman MacDonald had access from birth of an excellent education and wide social contacts. Much like his song collecting contemporary Frances Tolmie, he directed his advantages toward the study and promotion of the Gaelic traditions of Skye. An accomplished fiddler, he is best known for his *Skye* and *Gesto Collections*, which occupy a prominent place in the printed repertoire of Scottish fiddle music. His uncle, Neil MacLeod of Gesto, had produced a work on piping in 1820 and had taken down transcriptions of *canntaireachd* from a MacCrimmon piper; his regard for traditional music was very likely an influence on his nephew. MacDonald’s interests, and the scope of his writings, were wide ranging. His medical training and service in Burma led to publications on local medical practices; his publications on religion would have been considered in those days to be of a decidedly liberal bent. He was a contemporary, friend and ally of Alexander Carmichael, and in his later years produced several books on Gaelic tradition as well as compositions for the violin.

In his introduction, Lamb addresses the main questions surrounding *puirt-à-beul*, and it soon becomes apparent that the genre is not as trivial as previous treatments would suggest. In his discussions of its origins, Lamb draws on a wide range of sources including linguistic, literary and historical, and relates the associated melodies to printed music collections from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The upshot of this multidisciplinary approach is the suggestion that a good portion of the tunes are not recent compositions, and may well antedate by some time the earliest published sources. Regarding the origins of *puirt-à-beul*, cogent reasons are given – now well known to ethnologists in Scotland – against an association between their emergence into performed tradition and the proscription of various forms of music and dance following Culloden. The evidence instead indicates a close link between the *puirt* and the developing instrumental music tradition in the time before the first tune publications of the eighteenth century, with a useful chronological analysis provided of the first publications of the tunes in the collection (23). Turning to the words, the editor draws our attention to opportunities for attempting to date some of them from internal evidence associated with a specific historic event. Another association that emerges here, and with various items throughout the collection, is that with dance songs which are occasionally reflected in the words accompanying the tune. The association with dance, however far back it goes, is reinforced by early accounts of the performance of *puirt*, drawing on sources such as the travel description by Alexander Campbell, author of *Albyn’s Anthology*, of a performance occasion combining *puirt* and dance in North Uist during his journey throughout the western Highlands and Islands in 1815. The dance aspects of the *puirt* are examined closely by the editor, with reference to dance songs originating in medieval times

or before, and passing on to the performance aspects from the time that records became available. The association of *puirt* with circular dances is particularly intriguing, and Lamb points out parallels here with the waulking song tradition. The question as to whether *puirt-à-beul* were a viable means of accompanying dance with any regularity is dealt with carefully and in some detail. The custom of group singing, observed here and in North America, has the advantage of allowing for continuous delivery of the dance music and the ability to obscure the occasional error (27). It is demonstrated as well that the duration of singing, based on the required number of bars at widely observed tempos, falls well within the capability of singers recorded during the last century.

One of the strengths of the present edition is the way in which it places the collection in the larger context of published Scottish traditional music. Keith Norman MacDonald, not always the most careful of editors, included a substantial number of items whose sources were not attributed. These have been traced, and embrace collections by Patrick MacDonald, Alexander MacDonald (Inverness/Ness-side 1902), Frances Tolmie, and Alexander Campbell (*Albyn's Anthology*). Each item in the collection is prefaced by the compiler's original comments, and provided with detailed notes by the editor at the end of the book. A detailed reading with the tune names in Gaelic and Scots, and the accompanying introductions and notes is, to the reviewer's mind, the best introduction to information surrounding the central Gaelic tune repertoire presently available. In the Musical Notes and Commentary the author gives the recorded version when available on the *Tobar an Dualchais* website, where the performance can be heard; the source of the earliest publication of the item; the published source drawn on by MacDonald; its appearance in Cape Breton oral and instrumental tradition; interpretations of the words and possible historical content; and other members of the same 'tune family'. Between the audio links and the traditions attached to each item, the effect is to bring the collection alive in a way that other printed collections have not achieved before. Endnotes and a useful bibliography are provided, together with an index of titles, including all of those in Gaelic and the English ones in common usage.

For those interested in any aspect of Gaelic music, this new edition of a heretofore largely inaccessible but central work will prove to be immensely useful. The editor's work is imaginative and thorough, and ever conscious of the important relationship of the genre to the rest of Gaelic culture. Its applications will range from a reliable source for the performance of *puirt-à-beul* to new directions in research on Gaelic verbal and instrumental music.

JOHN SHAW

Hamish Henderson, A Biography. Timothy Neat. Volume 1 *The Making of the Poet* (1919-1953) Edinburgh: Polygon, 2007. £14.99. Volume 2 *Poetry Becomes People* (1952-2002). Edinburgh: Polygon, 2009. £25.00.

Timothy Neat's two substantial volumes constitute the first biography of Hamish Henderson. It was clearly a monumental task, and involved tackling a large and to some extent disorganised archive of personal papers, ranging through ten thousand letters to a series of remarkable creative notebooks full of draft poems and translations, reflections and jottings. Already, one consequence of the biography is that the archive has been systematically reviewed and prepared for cataloguing and preservation. Neat's use of the letters and creative papers is exemplary, allowing the subject to speak for himself, and by

so doing introducing most of us for the first time to these hidden seams. But Neat is also a storyteller, and to some extent companion on the journey, since he was a creative colleague and close friend of Henderson's later years. The storytelling has two aspects. In the first, Neat opens up areas of the life that have hitherto been closed off or the subject of mythologising. These include Henderson's upbringing as an orphaned child by enlightened church institutions in England, the identity of his father, the pivotal war years, his involvement in direct nationalist 'guerrilla' actions in postwar Scotland, the apparent failure in later years of his personal poetic gifts, and his sexuality. Though not all of these matters are definitively resolved, Neat lays out the ground with skill and sensitivity. The other aspect of Neat's storytelling relates to his gifts as a filmmaker as well as a biographer. He sounds some big cultural and political themes to give an epic tone and scale to the overall shape of the narrative. In his view, Hamish Henderson's life and work have a defining role in remaking Scotland's identity and in the championing of an inclusive, passionate sense of humanity. To this end, Neat accepts the mythologising as valid, affirming its role in defining the full heroic stature of his subject. This aspect of the work will inevitably divide critics and perhaps some readers, since it challenges the more academic canons of biography. Neat though remains true, in this as in much else, to the spirit of his subject, as Henderson himself consistently challenged academia with his own heady brew of poetic learning and political advocacy. Writing a while after publication of the completed work, it is interesting to note the widespread reception of Neat's work and the reactions evoked. These are characterised mainly by puzzlement. Why, reviewers ask, is Henderson not better known, and what exactly is his significance? Ethnologist? Poet? Activist? It is as if the sheer size, the scope and the diversity of Henderson's achievements are hard to assimilate. Also, there remains an elusiveness stemming from Henderson's presentation of himself, or lack of presentation, since few major public or artistic figures have been less interested in personal status or public definition on their own terms. The answers to this enigma lie in Neat's work, though sometimes the wealth of the material may obscure them. Henderson, in Neat's fashioning, is not just the poet, but the bard - one who intuits and articulates the collective, and speaks with prophetic urgency and insight in times of crisis. For Neat this far outweighs Henderson the scholar, significant as were his field collecting and publications for the School of Scottish Studies following its founding in 1951. It also outweighs political or educational or social considerations since all of these, for Henderson, were contained in the poetic vocation. As he wrote in an unpublished Workers Education Association lecture in Ireland in the late forties, quoted by Neat:

Art depends on the society. In primitive societies the poet or bard was an honoured person. Integrally part of the community. His songs or hymns were a part of the reality for the people (the poet's 'illusion' of the harvest field was part of the reality)...In all class societies the completeness of the artist's perception of reality is to a certain extent crippled.....Even in the period of rising imperialism - the robust self-confident capitalism of the Victorian age could still produce a Dickens - but in this anxious, despondent, febrile period of late capitalism artists have become more and more isolated, more and more shut in on themselves.....Poets of course realise this - realise what has been lost. The Scot MacDiarmid, and the Irishman Yeats have expressed it with poignancy...But others have retreated into 'contempt', into what would seem to be a contempt for life.....What is the alternative? (Volume 1: 235)

Henderson was writing and speaking these words at the same time as he was receiving the Somerset Maugham Prize for his own wartime poetry, 'Elegies of the Dead in Cyrenaica'. It explains why there was no disjunction for Henderson between the elegies of war experience and the making or collecting of songs. Only those who do not appreciate the artistry of Henderson's later songs can speak of him 'giving up poetry'. The overall poetic achievement has been garnered by Raymond Ross in the *Collected Poems and Songs*, edited in consultation with Henderson before his death, and it is now further supplemented by Neat from the notebooks. These lay out the seamless legacy of a fully conscious and committed artist who understood his vocation to be 'integrally part of the community', animated by a poesis that fuses personal inspiration, translations and folk song in an uncommon common art. Such was Hamish Henderson's alternative. But there is another level or resonance. In Neat's interpretation, Henderson is a wounded bard, one who has suffered personally and communally. Henderson is separated from his mother at a traumatic age and cut off from the Scottish environment and culture in which he has invested his earliest sense of familial identity. He is consoled and nurtured in the fellowship of the Anglican church and later of comrades-in-arms, including the Italian partisans, but his inner loss and yearning seek identification with a wider community. Through his intellectual growth, his artistic ambition, and his European experiences, Henderson harnesses these psychic energies into a radical passion for human unity, grounded in Scotland. In my view, Neat is wholly correct in placing the emergence and expression of Henderson's distinctive poetic vocation at the centre of the life. This is reinforced through the epic dimension of the biography, which is in effect 'Poetry and the People', as the individual poetic talent is given back to the carrying stream of the tradition through Henderson's later role as parent and symbolic figurehead of a widening cultural renaissance in Scotland. This wide ranging phenomenon is very inadequately covered by the term 'folk revival', as Neat's account of Henderson's many friendships and interactions demonstrates. The woundedness of Henderson's vocation relates intimately to the emotional power of his art, but also to the paradoxical hiddenness of so much of his personal experience. His preference for losing self in the communal is reflected in his love of congenial *céilidh*-making, which becomes both bacchanal and communion. Sexuality and family are not definitively expressed or dominant, since energies constantly transfer to embodying a collective or communal tradition that has to be energised, reformed and carried forward. Anonymity, or at least a lack of self-definition, is desirable because, this keeps open the channels of communication, and of the bardic gift. When the gift fails, then it is time to surrender life itself to the flow. Hence the passive thread interwoven through the later years. The warmth and acceptance that Henderson found amongst Scotland's Travelling People is emblematic in Neat's account of his vulnerability, and of how through poetry and people, he turned his wound to a wider gift. This transformative 'turning' is the theme of the lengthy Romance Tale '*Am Maraiche Màirnealach*' that Hamish Henderson collected from the Sutherland patriarch, Ali Dall Stewart. It is one of the finest folk narratives ever gathered from Scotland's riches, and clearly struck an emotional chord with Henderson as he walked alongside the Sutherland Travellers, recovering from the traumas of wartime service. Sheila Stewart, another vital Traveller tradition bearer, describes the reciprocal relationship between Henderson and this long marginalised culture:

‘Hamish told us about the Homes he was in. He had a hard life but he said it wisnae hard like the Travellers had - living in tents wi’ every hand against them. He had the grieving for his mother - but we had ‘the Tinker’s curse’.....People hated us and were terrified of us. It was Hamish who drew us back to the fire.’ (Volume 2: .49)

For Henderson, bringing Traveller culture into a renovated cultural mainstream was both a restoration of Scottish identity and a healing act of integration - personal, communal and poetic. Neat identifies a strong religious impulse running through Henderson’s life. But though he remained affectionately attached to his Scottish Episcopal heritage, Henderson’s religion is closer to Blake than church, and it fuels his poetic passions rather than repressing or even channelling them. As he wrote in a nineties notebook, quoted by Neat, ‘Love: Love is the only God that I believe in.’ If there remains a Hamish Henderson mystery, then its heart lies in that refusal to define, restrict or divide. By overturning deeply entrenched Scottish defences, he enabled an upwelling of cultural, social, political and spiritual energy that is still not exhausted, and that may yet ‘ding the fell gallows o the burghers down’. The whole enterprise was foreshadowed from the start by the poet himself in the closing stanza of the sixth Cyrenaica elegy:

So the words that I have looked for, and must go on looking for, are worlds of whole love, which can slowly gain the power to reconcile and heal. Other words would be pointless.

DONALD SMITH